

Final Report

The Alberta Agri-Business Network

June 30, 2008

Presented by the Agriculture & Food Council

Author: Brad Salomons, on behalf of the Human Resource Action Team

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1. Executive Summary

In early 2005, the Agriculture & Food Council (AFC) “broke ground” on a new strategic initiative called the Peer Network Project. The project intended to bring agri-business leaders together in setting that would not only remove them from the stereotyped “coffee shop gossip” of traditional rural agriculture, but simultaneously provide them with an opportunity to build a cadre of peer-to-peer relationships that would provide a backbone for business development, problem solving, personal support, and other often intangible resources that emerge from the interactions of like-minded individuals.

This project ran for a period of nearly three years until it ended on March 31, 2008. This document is a history and an evaluation of the Peer Networks Project.

The project went through two distinct phases of funding:

1) \$523,209 (extended) constituted the initial approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by the Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds from Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

2) \$64,668 constituted the second phase approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by the Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (AARD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Evaluation

The details of the full report contain discussion on the general operations of the groups and areas which may have fallen short of our goals for this project.

1. *Recruitment of New Members*
 - Interest in joining a network was strong, but this did not result in strong follow up on the part of candidates.
2. *Follow up from Promotion*
 - Our province-wide approach made it difficult to build new groups that were geographically accessible to everyone who was interested.
3. *Levels of Commitment and Buy-in*
 - Meetings were held but attendance was often spotty and sporadic, with last-minute cancellations or no-shows from confirmed participants.
4. *Meeting Styles*
 - Groups tried different styles of meetings, with varying success.
5. *Group Responsibilities*
 - The plan was always to build groups that could function independently, and this proved more difficult than anticipated.

6. *Information Tools*
 - These were developed and published but were used with varying levels of success.
7. *Expert Networks*,
 - Ultimately took the form of a “speakers subsidy” for groups, but was never significantly taken advantage of.
8. *Coordination with Other Networks*
 - Fostered on two levels: intra-group relations and collaboration with other non-Alberta Agri-Business Network groups, but never reached full potential.
9. *‘Manufactured’ Networks*
 - As suggested by members, “you can’t just put people together and make them participate.” Networks might best be benefits not objectives.

Recommendations

Following are summaries of suggestions that emerged from ongoing feedback and consultations on the project.

1. Recruitment and Sourcing Participants
 - *Focus on the event or program, and support any ‘natural’ networks rather than focusing on network formation and recruitment, barring that:*
2. Breadth of the Target Audience
 - *Choose a narrow range of participants, rather than province-wide recruitment.*
3. Rules of Order and Meeting Parameters
 - *Encourage groups to start by setting their own strong rules for meetings and participation based on suggestions.*
4. Membership Fees and Participation Incentive
 - *Tie a cash cost to participation to help ensure attendance, and support rigid rules on attendance and participation.*
5. Formal Inter-group Collaboration
 - *More frequent cross-group meetings may benefit networks overall.*
6. Rotating or Specialty Facilitators
 - *Facilitator-to-group relationships might work better as facilitator-to-topic relationships, where multiple facilitators/experts are contracted and any given facilitator/expert might only attend one or two topic-specific meetings a year on a rotating basis.*

Please see the full report for more details on the history, operations, structure, evaluation, and project recommendations of the Alberta Agri-Business Network.

2. A Brief History of the Alberta Agri-Business Network

2.a Background

In early 2005, the Agriculture & Food Council (AFC) “broke ground” on a new strategic initiative called the Peer Network Project. The project intended to bring agri-business leaders together in setting that would not only remove them from the stereotyped “coffee shop gossip” of traditional rural agriculture, but simultaneously provide them with an opportunity to build a cadre of peer-to-peer relationships that would provide a backbone for business development, problem solving, personal support, and other often intangible resources that emerge from the interactions of like-minded individuals.

This project ran for a duration of nearly three years until it ended on March 31, 2008. This document is a history and an evaluation of the Peer Networks Project.

Vision: “Alberta will be known by its professional farmers who are highly skilled and who continuously develop new opportunities and find new ways to redefine success.”

Mission: “To facilitate the formation of effective business management networks and/or peer groups learning forums that enables continuous learning.”

2.a.i The Business Plan

Human Resources was first identified as an area of interest in the 1997 Agriculture and Food Council (AFC) commissioned report *Human Resource Development & Management Issues in Alberta’s Agri-Industry “A Beginning.”* In early 2000, AFC partnered with AAFRD in Ag Summit 2000 to map out a shared agenda for developing and supporting agriculture in the new millennium that resulted in the 2002 Agrivantage Report. This report identified that human resource issues exist in the industry and that AFC was positioned to take a leading role in addressing some of those issues. In 2003, AFC planning sessions identified HR Capacity and Leadership as industry issues of interest and in 2004 Innovation in Agri-Business Management Fund (IAMF) commissioned *Human Resource Requirements in the Alberta Agri-Food Sector* to further define areas of need. Two opportunities were identified:

1. Human Resource Information Exchange Centre
2. Supporting the Formation of Effective Business Networks.

In October 2004, Toma and Bouma Management Consultants prepared the final business plan for the second opportunity. It was titled “Peer Networks as an Effective Learning Mechanism for Agriculture.” Funding for the Peer Network Project was secured from Council’s Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which at the time of application was funded directly from (then named) Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and APF Renewal funds from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. The two-year pilot project, known as the Peer Networks Project, began in July 2005.

The Peer Network Project Business Plan (October 2004) identified four strategic intentions to be addressed over the two year period of the project. Those four strategic intentions identified in the original business plan include:

1. Establish structure and processes that facilitate peer group formation.
2. Foster the establishment of two types of peer groups:
 - a. Production Forums
 - b. Business Management Forums
3. Establish a dynamic resource network comprising of subject matter experts, professionals, and reference material to meet the ongoing needs of participants.
4. Establish inter-regional with other agricultural peer networks and learning organizations and intra-sector linkages with other industries.

2.a.ii Early Work

Early in the project it became evident that flexibility in the recruitment and engagement of the target audience would be key to the development of the groups. As such, it was determined that the development of a “toolkit” which outlined how to start and operate a group would be best prepared as a learning outcome of the project rather than the starting point of the project. An information sheet outlining critical success factors was created which outlined the Agriculture & Food Council’s commitment and the requested participants’ commitment to the network. This was the framework under which groups would develop. Numerous members of various existing peer network-style groups were engaged early on to learn about what factors determined their continued participation in those peer networks. Also discussed were details about the structure of the networks that they participated in that were built into our own critical success factors and commitments. A launch and workshop event was held to introduce the idea to potential participants and also to provide an overview of the issues being faced by the agri-food industry, which would potentially be covered in the business management groups. Feedback was very positive and majority of participants indicated that they were interested in joining, confirming the need for the creation of agriculturally based business management peer networks.

The original Peer Networks Project business plan suggested significant observation and value in participants’ common reliance on ‘peer networks,’ whether these are formal or informal, as key tools for deciphering and making sense of often overwhelming quantity and complexity of information, enabling better decisions with the data and opinions they already regularly access. Almost all the producers interviewed referred to their ‘network’ as a vital source of strategic information upon which they make considerations and, ultimately, decisions. After more than a year of operation, the participants were again asked. They replied with enthusiasm and stated (anecdotally) they were benefiting from the experience.

It was under this premise that the project was continued and enhanced in its second year of operation. More details follow in this report.

2.a.iii Funding

As previously stated, the project was funded in its entirety by the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund (IAMF) which was funded directly by Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds through Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. The project went through two distinct phases of funding:

- 1) \$523,209 (extended) constituted the initial approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds through Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.
- 2) \$64,668 constituted the second phase approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds through Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (AARD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

2.b People

2.b.i Staff

Mr. Tom Marwick

CEO, Agriculture & Food Council, Duration of Project

Ms. Rebecca Wurm

Project Manager, Start of Project – December 2006

Mr. Brad Salomons

Project Manager, December 2006 – End of Project

Ms. Angela Wilson

Project Coordinator, October 2006 – End of Project

2.b.ii Facilitation

Mr. Bernard Vincent

Contracted Facilitator, March 2006 – End of Project

Mr. David Samm

Contracted Facilitator, March 2006 – February 2007

Ms. Grace Baker

Contracted Facilitator, April 2007 – End of Project

2.b.iii Human Resources Action Team Leads

Mr. Art Froelich

Chair, Start of Project – June 2006

Mr. Larry Malazdrewicz

Chair, June 2006 – End of Project

2.c Promotion of the Project

A variety of tools were used to promote the project. Our efforts in this regard were balanced between a number of variables: (a) capacity of the project based around limited financial and human resources enabled an operational capacity to support five groups; (b) geography of participants based on members' need to be clustered in geographic areas reasonably enabling regular travel to meetings in a relatively central location, and; (c) critical mass that was judged to be somewhere between six and twelve active participants.

Tools to promote the project and function of networks included:

1) Word of mouth

A number of participants for the program joined because they had "heard from a friend" or been enticed by another participant. The invaluable networks of Agriculture & Food Council members substantially bolstered initial interest in the project.

2) Partner presentations

Short visual presentations or speeches to groups assembled for other purposes.

3) Direct mail invites to events

Invitations to events sent to community, regional, commodity, and agricultural organizations encouraging them to select individuals to attend.

4) Organizational newsletter and website

The Catalyst and www.agfoodcouncil.com (Agriculture & Food Council's newsletter and website) provided a wide array of coverage and space on project activity and supporting recruitment efforts.

5) Printed brochure

A brochure detailing the objectives and recruitment details was in publication and widespread distribution.

6) Alberta Agri-Business Network (AABN) member newsletter

One issue of a network-specific newsletter was published and circulated among participants and others with interest before the project was ended. The newsletter was widely distributed and highlighted group activities and other interesting information about the operations.

7) AABN web-based forum

Primarily intended as an online meeting point for members, visitors (non-members) who could not log into the secured area of this website were presented with downloadable information about the project and how to join. Still, the website was never particularly popular with members.

3. The Anatomy of an Alberta Agri-Business Network Peer Network Group

3.a The Model

3.a.i Plan

As presented earlier, the original strategic goals of the project were to:

1. Establish structure and processes that facilitate peer group formation.
2. Foster the establishment of two types of peer groups:
 - a. Production Forums
 - b. Business Management Forums
3. Establish a dynamic resource network comprising of subject matter experts, professionals, and reference material to meet the ongoing needs of participants.
4. Establish inter-regional with other agricultural peer networks and learning organizations and intra-sector linkages with other industries.

3.a.ii Actual

These goals were achieved to varying degrees. Actual experience with and findings out of the project follow:

1. Processes

The details of promotion and facilitation are thoroughly presented throughout this document.

2. Two Types

- 1) One vertically integrated group consisting of members representing multiple levels of the agriculture and food value-chain.
- 2) Four horizontally integrated groups consist of members who were primary producers.

3. Resource Network

We launched an online discussion forum in mid-2007, shortly after the 2007 Forum event (discussed in detail later in this report.) The online forum was a simple discussion board where registered members (officially AABN participants) could discuss ongoing topics in open or restricted groups. Open groups would be accessible to all AABN members. Restricted groups would be accessible to only members of one specific group. Take-up for the online network was low.

4. Linkages

Over the course of the project, HR Project staff routinely met with participants and implementation staff from other groups or networking programs around Alberta and across Canada. There was a great deal learned from these contacts that was brought back to the AABN groups.

3.b The Members

3.b.i Profile of a Basic Member

Our view of what preferably defines ideal network members drove efforts recruiting new members. In summary, ideal candidates would:

... be able to cooperate with peers.

... be willing to learn from others.

... understand the value of information.

... realize there is a 'bigger picture.'

... bring experience to the table.

3.b.ii Roles and Responsibilities

"The success of the Alberta Agri-Business Network relies on the action of many talented people working together." (AABN Participant Handbook, 2007)

As we hoped much of the structure for the rules and operations of the group would emerge naturally as from the membership itself, there were very few set rules that defined the roles and responsibilities of members. See further discussion in this report's evaluation section. In the participant handbook these rules were listed simply as:

- to participate, engage, and work toward the goals of the group;
- to regularly attend meetings;
- to respect the group's rules on confidentiality, commitment and respect.

3.b.iii Meetings: Attendance, Participation, and Interaction

Again, as with roles and responsibilities of individual members, meeting styles were intended to be member-driven. This is to say members (while guided by facilitators) were free to drive the content and structure of meetings. As our information tools suggested, this structure was intended to fit within the construct of three basic premises, all emerging from the roles of individual members as noted in the previous section:

- **Attendance:** that members were expected to come to meetings as often as they could. How attendance was encouraged (or enforced, as some suggested) was up to the group members themselves. Other models for encouraging attendance were based upon concrete variables such as membership fees, absence fines, or a three-strikes policy. These models were presented as options for groups, but to our knowledge none were ever implemented. See further discussion in this report's evaluation section.

- **Participation:** that members – once in attendance – were expected to bring their own information ‘to the table.’ Again, driven by group members, the model was built upon the idea that trusting relationships could only be forged in an arena where all had a stake (personal, private, business, or otherwise) in the discussion.
- **Interaction:** that members were expected to respond to the information of others. As information was shared by group members, the concept of the peer networking model was that by doing so the experience and creativity of other members would open new avenues of problem solving for the topic at hand.

Ultimately, the objective for meetings could be defined simply as: “show up and be prepared to talk.” Spectators (individuals who expected to sit and listen) were either drawn out of that mentality by fellow members or did not continue attending.

3.c The Resources

3.c.i Staff

3.c.i.1 Management

The project was managed in two discrete stages by Agriculture & Food Council staff. Between the start of the project and the end of December 2006, Ms. Rebecca Wurm managed the project in its entirety, implementing the launch event and formation of the first groups. Ms. Wurm left the organization and management transferred to Mr. Brad Salomons for the duration of the project.

3.c.i.2 Coordination

In October 2006 it was determined that additional support was required to operate the project and Ms. Angela Wilson was added to the staff compliment in a project coordination role. Ms. Wilson oversaw day-to-day operations including most direct communication with members and participants, development of information tools, and event planning for the duration of the project.

3.c.ii Facilitation

3.c.ii.1 Recruitment and Contracting

All facilitation was completed by third party contracted facilitators engaged through open competition via a wide-spread, public request for proposals. Facilitators were contracted on six-month re-negotiable contracts and paid on a monthly invoice as managed by Agriculture & Food Council.

3.c.ii.2 Roles

The role of facilitators was determined to be:

- To make the discussion easier;
- To enhance the group's performance by maintaining an open and comfortable environment for discussion for all members;
- To introduce discussion topics and speakers, as required;
- To ask questions and help spark new lines of discussion when required;
- To keep the group on task and working towards agreed-upon goals;
- To ensure fair opportunity for participation in discussion for all members.

3.c.ii.3 Goals

The goal of facilitation was to make one individual available to the group on a paid contractual basis to coordinate early meetings and facilitate the discussion at those meetings. It was not the intention of the project to provide a paid "leader" or "organizer" for the network group, but rather to provide means to start and motivate groups and provide arms-length operational support and guidance.

3.c.ii.4. Cooperation

In early 2007 the project team consulted with facilitators on the idea of a "Facilitator Coordinator" – an added responsibility for an existing facilitator – whose role would include encouraging cooperation and communication between facilitators. This was undertaken by Mr. Bernard Vincent and explained in the facilitator handbook:

While staff can effectively manage the day-to-day activities of Alberta Agri-Business Network (including resources, budget, events, planning, etc.), need has been identified to add a level of authority to the facilitation of the project. For this reason we have allocated a facilitator coordinator role. This role is filled by an expanded contract with one existing facilitator.

Two responsibilities are managed by the person filling this role:

1) Communication, specifically between facilitators and Alberta Agri-Business, and also between the facilitators themselves. As the project grows and more facilitators are

brought on board, it is very important that one experienced person be the primary conduit and resource for information through these groups. This could be required for any number of reasons, including but not limited to problem solving, succession, event discussion, etc.

2) Recruitment Support, specifically the support and management of that "first follow-up" and for screening of new applicants. The point person likely does not do the actual follow-up and screening work, but rather their role would be to help set and achieve standards for this process. This includes setting timelines and methodology, strategically planning efforts, fostering the development of new groups, and coaching other facilitators to ensure that these goals are achieved.

3.c.ii.5 Invited Guests

A guest speaker remuneration policy was implemented in late 2007 to encourage participants and facilitators to seek external agents to supply “expert” information during group meetings. The contents of the policy are outlined below.

Network groups wishing to contract presenters/speakers for regularly scheduled group meetings will have access to allotted funds from the Agriculture and Food Council through the Peer Networks Project. Funds will be distributed based on the following criteria:

- *Funds are available based on cost sharing only – 50% AFC contribution, 50% Member contribution.*
- *AFC contribution not to exceed \$500/group/fiscal year (April 1 – Mar.31)*
- *Presenters / speakers must be approved through the group facilitator and relate to specific topics of agri-business management within the guidelines of the Alberta Agri-Business Network mandate.*
- *Groups wishing to contract presenter/speakers jointly may do so with total costs being split in the following manner – 50% AFC, remaining 50% split evenly by the number of groups participating.*
- *No formal application process is necessary; however, group facilitators should provide written request for funds to the Human Resource Project Manager or Coordinator allowing adequate time for financial approval.*
- *The Agriculture and Food Council will require a copy of the presenter/speaker’s invoice subsequent to the engagement.*

No group made use of the funds or the policy during the six months between implementation and the end of the project, but the concept was well-received by facilitators and participants.

3.c.iii Tangibles

3.c.iii.1 Resource Binders

Though initial plans had called for resource kits to be made available to both facilitators and participants early in the project, information and staffing issues delayed their development and deployment into early 2007.

Two versions of the binder were developed: (a) the participants' binder, contained general information tools describing and supporting participant roles and responsibilities in their groups; and (b) the facilitators' binder, a larger version of the participant binder with additional information describing and supporting facilitator roles, contract details, and further resource references in addition to a supply of forms and tools for tracking participation and participant development.

Agriculture & Food Council will make available as electronic documents copies of all materials from both the participant and facilitator binders for a limited time.

The table of contents for both versions follows on the next two pages.

Resource Binder Participant Handbooks, Table of Contents

Section 1: Welcome and Contact Information

- Letter of Welcome
- Table of Contents
- AABN Calendar
- About this Handbook
- Alberta Agri-Business Network Project Contacts
- Funding Acknowledgment

Section 2: Copies of AABN Toolkits

- Brochure
- Process Pamphlet – Recruitment Information
- Roadmap – Directions for Group Success

Section 3: Meeting Information

- Meeting Minutes
- Meeting Agendas
- Group Action Plans
- Group Contact Information
- Meeting Notes

Section 4: Personal Information

- Personal Action Forms
- Personal Notes

Section 5: Resources

- Inspiration Pages (quotes from books and articles)
- Login to the Resource Network
- Industry Contact Information
- Communication Starters
- How to Use Action Plans (Example Forms)

Resource Binder Facilitator Handbooks, Table of Contents

Section 1: Welcome and Contact Information

- Letter of Welcome
- Table of Contents
- Contacts
- AABN Calendar
- About this Handbook
- Funding Acknowledgment

Section 2: Copies of AABN Toolkits

- Brochure
- Process Pamphlet – Recruitment Information
- Roadmap – Approaches & Processes for Group Success

Section 3: Facilitator AABN Framework

- General Expectations
- Roles and Responsibilities (Facilitators, Member, AABN)
- Reporting to AABN
- Appropriate Expenses and Annual Budget
- Billing and Invoicing
- Request for New Facilitators (Modified RFP)

Section 4: AABN Facilitation Tools (Blank Forms)

- When to Use Forms
- Member Profile (Form)
- Attendance Sheet (Form)
- Check-In (Form)
- Overall Group Evaluation (Form)
- Evaluation Reporting (Form)
- Personal Action Plans (Form)
- Group Action Plan (Form)
- Minutes (Form)

Section 5: General Facilitation Information

- Inspiration Pages (quotes from books and articles)
- AABN Library (loaner books for Facilitators)

Section 6: Completed Group Paperwork

- For Facilitator Use

Section 7: Completed Individual Paperwork

- For Facilitator Use

3.c.iii.2 Newsletter

While it was intended to be published frequently, there was only ever one issue of the Network-specific newsletter before the project was ended. A popular piece, the newsletter was widely distributed and its content highlighted group activities and other interesting information about the operations. The newsletter was produced internally for minimal cost.

3.c.iv Locations

3.c.iv.1 Free

Whenever possible, the AABN made use of public buildings or private dwellings that were sourced and used at zero cost to the group. These free locations included government meeting rooms and other similar locations, “tour” locations, and personal homes of participants.

2.c.iv.2 Rented

When a zero-cost option was not available, project staff and facilitators sourced low-cost options for meeting space. The goal was not to use these spaces as long term solutions, but as temporary locations until a free alternative could be located. Paid locations included recreational facilities and, on one occasion, a hotel conference room.

Of course, large scale events such as the launch, forum, and final consultation were held at a hotel facility where rooms, audio-video systems, and catering services were readily available.

2.d Funding and Expenditures

As stated previously, the funding (as per applications) for this project was requested and budgeted in two phases:

1) \$523,209 (extended) constituted the initial approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by the Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds from Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

2) \$64,668 constituted the second phase approved amount from the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund which was funded directly by the Agricultural Policy Framework - Renewal funds from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development (AARD) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Restatement of Revenue and Expenditures

	Revenue	Expenditure
Year Ending March 31, 2006	\$144,669	\$144,669
Year Ending March 31, 2007	\$199,628	\$199,628
Year Ending March 31, 2008	\$130, 398	\$130, 398
Total	\$474,695	\$474,695

Discrepancy between the application amounts and the stated revenues and expenditures are attributed to differences and measurable changes in operations, including but not limited to staffing amendments, general project take-up, and resource development and costs. The details of this report are intended to illuminate and elaborate upon the justification for these discrepancies.

Full budget breakdowns are not included in this report, but are available from the Agriculture & Food Council upon request.

4. Implementation of the Alberta Agri-Business Network

4.a Overall Project Timeline

Detailed records were retained by Agriculture & Food Council of meeting dates and locations. That information is available as quarterly reports to our funding agents and will not be repeated here. Overall, the project ran for roughly three years, starting in the spring of 2005 with the approval of the business plan and contracting of the project manager. The official launch was held in early 2006 and the operation of groups proceeded from a time shortly after that launch until the close of business on March 31, 2008.

Milestones are detailed in the sections that follow.

4.b Launch & Workshop

On March 1st and 2nd, 2006 the Alberta Agribusiness Network held a launch event for potential network participants. The event was designed to promote the idea of peer networking as a means to developing business skills and experience.

4.b.i Goals and Objectives

The Launch and Workshop were developed to provide an overview of peer networks and how they work. Success stories, positive examples, and industry-level strategic thinking were meant to stimulate discussion of issues and opportunities and the value that peer networks could provide in addressing these.

4.b.ii Speakers and Participants

Highlights from the two day agenda included:

Jerry Bouma, Toma & Bouma Management Consultants

Moderator

Jerry Bouma has over 25 years experience in strategic planning, business management, and marketing within the agri-food sector.

Larry Martin, CEO George Morris Centre

Larry led the workshop portion of the event, presenting essential business management topics including strategic visioning, human resource management, risk management, and public policy.

Appointed the first director of Canada's only independent agri-food think-tank in 1990 and CEO when the George Morris Centre became a not-for-profit corporation in 1998.

James Cumming, President, Princeton Developments

“Why Peer Networks Work? How they have helped us.”

Angela Santiago, Managing Director, The Little Potato Company

“Why Peer Networks Work? How they have helped us.”

In September 1996 Angela and her father started The Little Potato Company Ltd.

Darrell Toma, Toma & Bouma Management Consultants

“Best Management Practices of Leading Farmers: Learning from Leaders”

Darrell has over 25 years of experience in professional consulting and has been heavily involved in Western Canada's value added developments.

Ted Bilyea, Past Executive Vice-President, Maple Leaf Foods

“Issues, Challenges & Opportunities for the Agri-Food Industry in this Decade”

Ted Bilyea retired in May 2005 as Executive Vice-President of Maple Leaf Foods Inc. having spent a very successful 35 years with the same company.

4.b.iii Evaluation

As stated previously, feedback was very positive and the majority of participants indicated that they were interested in joining, confirming the need for the creation of a formal agricultural-based business management peer network.

3.b The First Year

Meetings

The first official meetings and initial results were positive. Two facilitators, one for each group, were actively engaged to lead. At all meetings rough (confidentiality-minded) notes were compiled to record impressions of the discussion.

Tools

Following the success of the brochure, our toolkit strategy underwent an evolution to a three-tiered information approach. The first tier, the brochure, was launched and available as previously reported. The second tier was a “process pamphlet”, a short, modular document to be shared with interested potential participants to provide additional information on joining and participating. The third and final tier was a “roadmap.” All three tiers were completed in early 2007.

Forum

During the last few months of the first year of operation, dates (March 1 and 2, 2007) and an agenda for the Peer Networks Forum were finalized to address two objectives: (a) re-energization of existing members, and (b) recruitment for expansion and development of new groups.

Please note: It is not the intention of this report to disclose details of the group's operations that may be considered confidential or otherwise a breach of our privacy agreements.

3.b.i Group 1 – Lacombe (BV)

Compliment: A horizontally integrated group of primary producers representing a geography roughly encompassed by a one hundred and fifty kilometer radius from Lacombe, Alberta.

Facilitation: This group was facilitated by Mr. Bernard Vincent.

Frequency: This group aimed for a monthly meeting schedule.

Locations: Most meetings were held at the provincial building in Lacombe, Alberta, but the group also took opportunity to use their meetings to travel and tour local agri-food sites of interest.

3.b.ii Group 2 – Lacombe (DS)

Compliment: A vertically integrated group of varying members representing a geography roughly encompassed by a one hundred and fifty kilometer radius from Lacombe, Alberta

Facilitation: This group was facilitated by Mr. David Samm.

Frequency: This group aimed for a six-per-year meeting schedule.

Locations: Most meetings were held at the provincial building in Lacombe, Alberta.

3.c AABN Forum

On March 1st and 2nd, 2007, the Alberta Agribusiness Network held its first annual Forum for network participants. With nearly seventy-five participant registrations and a relatively high percentage of attendance based on registrations, the event was considered a success.

3.c.i Goals and Objectives

“The Alberta Agri-Business Network Forum is an event that is hosted annually to allow all of the individual network groups to come together to provide new and up-to-date information in the agriculture industry. The forum not only provides time for all the Agri-Business Network participants to interact with fellow network peers who are outside their group but also an opportunity to invite other peers within Alberta to exchange valuable insight and experience. Network members and industry participants will have the opportunity for further learning by attending sessions with agriculture and agri-food experts and leaders. The forum is critical in providing access to a larger network of information, innovation and experience.” (2007 Forum Workbook)

3.c.ii Speakers and Participants

Highlights from the two-day agenda included:

Jerry Bouma Toma & Bouma Management Consultants

Moderator

Jerry Bouma has over 25 years experience in strategic planning, business management, and marketing within the agri-food sector. He is currently the senior partner with Toma & Bouma Management Consultants. Previously, Jerry has held management positions with Maple Leaf Foods and Deloitte Haskins & Sells.

Rick Harvey, CMC, Chair, TEC The CEO Club

“The Value of Networking”

Rick has consulted for Board Chairs, CEOs, Presidents, COOs and senior executives for almost 30 years. He is familiar with the challenges, issues and matters that affect and are important to chief decision makers who are charged with providing leadership, motivation and direction to an organization.

Heather Broughton, Participant

“The Value of Networking”

Heather, together with her husband Greg, operates a family grain farm in the Donalda area, as well as a custom trucking operation. Heather is a participant in the Alberta Agri-Business Network.

Ellen Goddard, Department of Rural Economy, University of Alberta

“Becoming the Innovator – Food, Market & Consumer Trends”

Ellen is Chair of the Department of Rural Economy in the Faculty of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics, University of Alberta (2002-present). She also holds an appointment as Cooperative Chair in Agricultural Marketing and Business, University of Alberta.

Edward Tyrchniewicz, P.Ag, Associate Dean, Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba

Evening Keynote “Changing the Mindset in Agriculture”

Trained as an Agricultural Economist (PhD – Purdue University), Ed has worked in Universities for 40 years with almost 25 of those years being in various academic administrative positions. While at the University of Manitoba (1967-88), he was a Professor of Agricultural Economics, Head of the Department of Agricultural Economics, and Founding Director of the Transport Institute. He then served as Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry at the University of Alberta (1988-96).

Danny Klinefelter, Professor and Extension Economist, Texas A&M

“Understanding the Next Generation”

Professor and Extension Economist at Texas A&M University, specializing in agricultural finance and management development. He is the director of The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers (TEPAP) and co-director of the Texas A&M Family and Owner-Managed Business. In addition, he serves as the Executive Secretary for the Association of Agricultural Production Executives (AAPEX). He is also coordinator of the Planning the Return to the Farm Program. He is a member of the board of Ag Texas Farm Credit Services and Texas Enterprise Bank.

Keith Wilson B.A., LL.B. Wilson Law Offices

“Political, Regulatory and Environmental Issues Facing Alberta Agribusiness”

Keith Wilson is an Edmonton-based lawyer who specializes in agricultural and environmental law. Prior to entering private practice, Keith worked for 8 years with the provincial Department of Agriculture.

Elaine Froese, Certified Farm Family Business Coach

“Tying it All Together – a Think Tank Session”

Elaine holds a certificate in coaching from the Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, and certificate in conflict resolution from Mediation Services. She is a mediator for the Farm Debt Mediation Service. As a family business coach she engages the energy and innovation of young farmers intent on succeeding the farm business.

3.c.iii Evaluation

Feedback on the event was strong and positive, and the Agriculture & Food Council profiled the forum in its quarterly newsletter, as included below.

Forum participants encouraged to 'fly with eagles' via peer networks – (As printed in THE CATALYST, AFC'S Quarterly Newsletter)

Ag business experts encouraged participants in the Alberta Agri-Business Network Forum to build on their successes by joining a network.

"You need people to stimulate you," Danny Klinefelter, a professor and extension economist at Texas A&M University specializing in agricultural finance and management development told the 70 participants attending the March event in Red Deer. "You need people to bounce your ideas off of, someone who can ground you. There's an old saying: 'Fly with eagles, don't scratch with turkeys.'"

Klinefelter also advocated for meeting with people from diverse backgrounds.

"Put yourself in a position where you go outside of agriculture, outside your geographic area, outside your commodity group," he said. "Almost all the best ideas I've seen in agriculture have been done somewhere else before."

Klinefelter listed forming peer advisory groups under Creativity, Innovation and Re-Invention on his Ten Emerging Management Issues/Areas for the Next Decade.

Many of the agricultural producers who are members of the two current Alberta Agri-Business Network groups that started up last year attended the forum March 1 and 2. Many of the other participants were interested in finding out more about joining an existing network or forming their own.

"The peer group gives you the opportunity to have a full range of experiences," said Bernard Vincent, who facilitates one of the existing networks. "We all have experience, but if you don't reflect on your experience, you don't learn."

Vincent said that whether people want to join a network or have a group of people who want to form their own group, Alberta Agri-Business Network staff and resources are available to help.

Leduc-area producer Andreas Grueneberg has attended a few meetings of his peer network and encourages others to do the same.

"We've only been farming for nine years," he said, explaining that he and his wife Mary Ellen purchased their farm operation called Greens, Eggs and Ham

after working in other areas. “Before that I didn’t have contacts in the farming community. I had nowhere to go to exchange ideas.

“I see the network as a mechanism to share thoughts and feelings and get feedback from other people. In return I’m hoping to get some ideas for our business, even though our business is very different.”

Grueneberg cautioned that not everyone will get the full benefit from joining a peer network.

“You have to know that you need to make changes on an ongoing basis in your operation and you have to be at the point in your life that you know you have to keep learning,” he said. “You have to be prepared to make a long-term commitment, and you have to be willing to disclose.”

But all the speakers emphasized that being willing to open up to a group about your business doesn’t happen at the first meeting. Participants have to build trust over time.

(The Catalyst, Spring 2007)

3.d. The Second Year

In addition to the continuing operations and support of the Lacombe Group, three new groups were set into operation due to ongoing promotion and recruitment efforts, including but not limited to the Forum event. The groups were named (but not necessarily solely located in) the Olds Group, the Fort Saskatchewan Group, and the Lethbridge Group. The two latter groups were assumed as a new level of responsibility by the existing facilitator, Mr. Bernard Vincent, but a new facilitator, Ms. Grace Baker, was contracted to facilitate the operations of the Olds Group.

Successes

Meetings

By the end of the second year, four groups were meeting at varying intervals and recording varying levels of success. Three new groups that had spawned as direct or indirect results of the Forum slowly ramped up operations and by the end of this year were all on track to some measure of success.

Tools

All three tiers of the recruitment documents were launched, and we turned our attention to building a pair of operational workbooks and toolkits for the participants and facilitators. These modular binders are crafted with all three recruitment documents, but also supplemented with a variety of other basic information, forms, and meeting drivers. The response to both binders was initially positive, though the use of the workbooks by participants was (anecdotally) quick to drop-off.

Facilitation

Thanks to a Request for Proposal (RFP) process, we were able to locate an additional facilitator to compliment our current contract. Both facilitators brought remarkable insight and strength to the project and were instrumental in the successes recorded.

Recognized Delays

Facilitation

With great thanks to the facilitators involved in the project to this stage, there continued to be need to acknowledge the challenges in starting a new group through the facilitator-based model, including communicating the needs of the project to a third-party, actively involving the third-party facilitators, and providing strong resource (texts and information) support to enhance the start-up process. We think we have learned greatly from this process, but initial work was a source of delay.

Ongoing Attendance Issues

Throughout operations we found that there is something of a “two meeting hump” that needed to be overcome by new members. Once a participant attends two meetings, we found that they either fully commit or quit. Until that point (it seems) there is wavering commitment and variable attendance. This sometimes makes it difficult to plan meetings, and led to numerous re-scheduling and cancellation of meeting dates.

Online Network

We did formally launch an online discussion group which was made available to all users, and promoted as such. We did heavily rely on self-motivated (peer pressure) take-up but overall that was weak and limited, and may demonstrate that this kind of tool is not useful for social peer networking in this industry. The tool was run at a very low cost using open-source software, but in the end was not an effective tool for the AABN.

Please note: It is not the intention of this report to disclose details of the groups' operations that may be considered confidential or otherwise a breach of our privacy agreements.

3.d.i New Group 3 – Lethbridge

Compliment: A horizontally integrated group of primary producers representing a geography roughly encompassed by a one hundred kilometer radius from Lethbridge, Alberta

Facilitation: This group was facilitated by Mr. Bernard Vincent.

Frequency: This group aimed for a six-per-year meeting schedule.

Locations: The Lethbridge group had many struggles and had trouble finding a permanent home. Meetings were held in hotel facilities.

3.d.ii New Group 4 – Olds

Compliment: A horizontally integrated group of primary producers representing a geography roughly encompassed by a one hundred and fifty kilometer radius from Olds, Alberta

Facilitation: This group was facilitated by Ms. Grace Baker.

Frequency: This group aimed for a six-per-year meeting schedule.

Locations: The Olds group met in the Town of Olds twice before moving to a more personal model, choosing to hold the bulk of its meetings as hosted meetings in member homes.

4.e.iii New Group 5 – Fort Saskatchewan

Compliment: A horizontally integrated group of primary producers representing a geography roughly encompassed by a one hundred and fifty kilometer radius from Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta

Facilitation: This group was facilitated by Mr. Bernard Vincent.

Frequency: This group aimed for a six-per-year meeting schedule.

Locations: The Fort Saskatchewan group made use of the Dow Centre in that city.

4.f Conclusion

4.f.i The Event as Originally Planned

The initial motivation behind the event was to work towards an annual meeting on a scale smaller than either the Forum or the launch that would engage all operational groups in a large-scale meeting:

“We want to create a balance between presentations and free time to interact and meet others. We will begin by having all attendees briefly introduce themselves and complete this sentence, “Something I would like to discuss with others is” People will have the opportunity to search out others during the non-structured sessions and have those discussions. We also encourage people to stay after the second presentation and further meet and discuss with others. This is often when the really interesting things are discussed.” (Discussions and Planning)

The Draft Agenda:

1:30 - 2:00 Introductions

2:00 - 3:15 Andy Sirski presentation - "Building Wealth for Farm Families"

3:15 - 4:30 Open Q&A with Andy (people can come and go if they desire)

4:30 - 6:00 Peer group catch-ups, non-structured opportunities for groups to catch up and/or intermingle with other groups

6:00 - 7:00 Supper

7:00 - 9:00 Christine Murphy with interactive presentation on "Harvesting Ideas - Developing Techniques for Creativity"

9:00 - Peer catch-up and intermingle

Until March 22, 2008 this was the plan for the event and it had been booked and scheduled accordingly.

4.f.ii A Last-Minute Change

March 26, 2008

To all Alberta Agri-Business Network Participants,

It is with regret that as of March 31, 2008 the Agriculture and Food Council will no longer have funding to continue the Alberta Agri-Business Network. After several months we were unsuccessful in seeking funding to continue the program. As a result the Action Team committee for the project met on March 20, 2008 and decided that continuing with Alberta Agri-Business Network program was no longer feasible.

The Agriculture and Food Council would like to take this opportunity to thank every participant for the energy and efforts given in making this program the success it was. The Alberta Agri-Business Network's purpose has always been to bring leading agri-business owners together, in a supportive, confidential group environment to foster the exchange of new information, perspective and experience to its members and we feel this was accomplished with your involvement.

While the Agriculture and Food Council will no longer be able to provide facilitation and resources to your groups, we encourage you to continue to meet and grow past our involvement.

Over the coming months we will be preparing a comprehensive report on the project. If you would like to contribute your thoughts or impressions of the Alberta Agri-Business Network to that report – or if you would like to receive a copy when it is published – please contact Agriculture and Food Council. You can contact the project manager, Brad Salomons, at 780-955-3714 ext. 236 or by email at brad.salomons@agfoodcouncil.com.

It has been a pleasure working with some of the industry's best. We wish you success in all your business endeavors and look forward to an opportunity to collaborate in the future.

Sincerely,

*Larry Malazdrewicz
Chair, Human Resource Action Team*

4.f.iii A Candid Discussion

Attendance

Representation from three of the four groups met with strong attendance from project staff, the Council's Human Resource Action Team, and facilitators.

What was discussed?

A summary of discussion and our observations and recommendations appears later in this document. Participants echoed the concerns of the project staff and facilitators regarding attendance and buy-in of the groups, and offered suggestions on improving any future efforts. Overall, participants were happy with having been involved and about the general concept and experience, if not about the sudden shut-down of the project.

5. Evaluation

From recruitment to the final thoughts on the project, the following represents a compilation of perspectives from various formal and informal sources about what worked and what didn't. These are a summary of the views of the staff, facilitators, participants, and other stakeholders of the AABN.

5.a Recruitment of New Members

Interest in joining a network was strong, but this did not result in strong overall recruitment.

As discussed earlier, a number of tools were used to promote the project, its goals, and opportunities for new members. One objective of these methods of recruitment was intended to maintain a qualitative standard for new participation and not simply populate groups with anyone who would show up to a meeting. Was this the right approach? Or were we in fact limiting our success by a narrow selection process? Of course, this is pure speculation but our goals and objectives for these methods were quite clear: we intended to bring together people who (based on their histories and references) seemed the most likely to both benefit and embrace the opportunity of a peer network, immerse those people in our vision for the project, and then encourage them to join a new or existing group.

The result of this effort was one-on-one meetings, group presentations, and larger-scale annual events that netted a generous list of names and contact information. But, as we learned, the ratio of audience to participants would be lower than anticipated.

5.b Follow-up from Promotion

Our province-wide approach made it difficult to build new groups that were geographically accessible to everyone who was interested.

Three scenarios tended to emerge from any average promotion event: (a) some people would attend part of the event and leave before the conclusion without sharing contact information, (b) some people would attend, sit back and watch, then leave and forget, and (c) some people would attend, participate, linger, chat, and assure us of their intention to participate. By anecdotal estimate only, the number in this last group usually amounted to only fifteen to twenty percent of all attendees. And it was from this group that our new recruitment base was to be formed.

If it had been as easy as moving that twenty percent into an active group, we anticipate that the Networks would have been inundated with new members, but complications in follow-up from promotion tended to narrow this field. Some factors included:

- Geographic factors: These are multiple and include: no group near to a new recruit; multiple new recruits from a new area, but insufficient numbers to form a critical mass new group; a group nearby but a perceived conflict; or even a group nearby but uninterested in joining an existing group.
- Excitement factors; Anyone who has ever attended a so-called “motivational event” of any kind may recall coming home on a bit of an emotional high note. Our events, while not “motivational” *per se*, were optimistic and positive, and many people left feeling great and ready to join the project with unbridled effort. Whatever the reason, this feeling often did not endure long enough to transition an excited recruit into an active participant.
- Scheduling factors: The availability of the average producer is a complex thing, and while we timed the bulk of our events for months when the majority of “down time” occurred across the farms of Alberta, the timelines between event, phone follow-up, invitation to a meeting, and attending a meeting often pushed a new member to choose between seeding, harvest, calving, *et cetera* and joining a fledgling network to which his affiliation was still tenuous. This commitment and buy-in often came later, but for a delicate few meetings it also proved to be a road-block to success.

5.c Levels of Commitment and Buy-in

Meetings were held but attendance was often spotty and sporadic, troubled by last-minute cancellations or no-shows from confirmed participants.

It was not unfair of us to expect new members to join a group – new or existing – at a running pace. The very nature of the network forced the aspect of member commitment to the group to grow from the activities of participation and sharing. In speaking with numerous members it was clear that if there was no value demonstrated within the first meeting (second, if we were lucky) there would be no buy-in and no repeat. Thus, commitment from any member came down to a simple equation of time and perceived value. If this did not meet a minimum – as we regrettably discovered – a member would hang on, but the meetings would stop being a priority. Attendance would fall. Meetings would be held and only a minimum of people would show up. New people would outnumber veterans and the group may as well have started fresh for lack of a foundation to build upon. By the end of the project enough members had committed to certain groups that somewhere there must have been a respectable level of value from the meetings. But this was not always the case, and this turnover and dropout rate was a source of constant frustration for everyone involved. Could this have been enhanced through different styles of meetings or a more organized structure? Some have suggested that cash commitment, or more strict rules be applied – but as was the style of the meeting and the management, this decision was presented as an option but never anything more formal.

5.d Meeting Styles

Different groups tried different styles of meetings, with varying success.

As referenced earlier, attendance, participation, and interaction were the three pillars of an average meeting. We made no effort to enforce agendas, topics, timelines, rules of order, or other limitations. Ideas were provided in the information tools, but beyond those suggestions, meetings were often nothing more than facilitated member discussions on whatever topic happened to be important that day. This method was intended as an exercise of casual trust building; discussion that was led by the participants and hopefully contributed to honest feelings of ownership and meaningful direction within the group. But it was casual. It was not as organized as new members may have expected as they sat in a meeting for the first time. Admittedly, this framework is something that is often difficult to convey to a new group of individuals looking to build a new rapport with a room of strangers. Did this present a barrier to recruitment? Perhaps, but in retrospect it would have been difficult to justify more rigid controls in favor of honest group responsibility for their own purpose.

5.e Group Responsibilities

The plan was always to build independent groups, and this proved more difficult than anticipated.

As groups matured, responsibility for the maintenance of a group's membership gradually transitioned to the group itself. In some respects this worked – the sense of ownership it conveyed translated to a self-contained group cohesiveness that became important in the longer term – but in other ways it did not. Where it did not work was that with (a) the sense of cooperation and (b) ongoing facilitation, there was never a case where a clear group leader emerged to coordinate participant members in any unified efforts. We suggested models of rotating meeting leads, or senior participants acting as mentors for junior participants, but the lack of a single person standing up and moving the group forward independent of the project and the facilitators was a shortcoming of the model we had built and operated. Could this have been coordinated better with stronger tools, better communication, or different models? It is doubtful, though not impossible, that any single person would have ever assume leadership within the context of the applied model.

5.f Information Tools

These were developed and published but were used with varying levels of success.

As referenced previously, three primary channels of ongoing communication were provided to participants and facilitators. These were meant to act as guiding tools, direct or indirect. Directly, the resource binders were written as “guides and toolkits” for the running of a meeting and project policies. Indirectly, newsletters and an online discussion forum were intended to spark ideas and cross-collaboration between groups,

offering suggestions for meetings, guest speakers, or upcoming events. While implemented as fully as resources permitted, their use was never as widespread as we would have liked. Anecdotal reports suggested that binders were often left at home and eventually forgotten. And web-forum registrations peaked at less than ten.

5.g Expert Networks

Ultimately this took the form of a “speakers subsidy” for groups, but was never significantly taken advantage of.

As early work with groups turned into gradual success – regular meetings and returning membership – the drive for meeting content strengthened and our feedback was one of providing the means to bring in topic experts. We discussed this and the result was a remuneration cost available (as detailed earlier in this report). We felt this had the potential (especially as it was requested by participants) of being used more over time, but the actual budget was not touched before the project ended operations.

5.h Coordination with Other Networks

This was being fostered on two levels: intra-group relations and collaboration with other non-Alberta Agri-Business Network groups, but never reached full potential.

It could be argued that we were working towards this as the project unexpectedly ended funding. Our March 2008 event was scheduled to be a formal meeting of the four operational groups to enhance their own experiences with the AABN. However, this was something that was suggested late in our own operational process and once started was highly anticipated by participants.

Additionally, some work was done collaborating with other network-style groups around Alberta and had the project continued this would have become an invaluable source of information for managers and facilitators moving forward with our own operations. Early utilization of these non-AABN groups as collaborators and cooperators would have been more useful early on.

5.i Manufactured Networks

As suggested by members, “you can’t just put people together and make them participate.” Building a network might best be a benefit, not an objective.

As we gathered for a final consultation with the members and stakeholders of the Alberta Agri-Business Network late in March 2008, it was suggested that one cannot force a network. Networks, it was suggested, are the result of other things: relationships among people who spend time learning together, of individuals uniting around a cause, alliances maintained and nurtured through business opportunities, or friendships adapted into professional relationships. Our networks, through a well-intentioned and strong, but scattered recruitment process, brought people together with few natural reasons to meet.

Yes, networks were fostered from this group. Yes, there were, are, and may continue to be groups that meet and discuss issues that improve their abilities, confidence, and experience as agricultural producers in Alberta. But is this the most efficient way to produce and run a set of peer networks? It is difficult to justify this method. And if we were to attempt such a feat again it seems far more valuable to focus on the opportunity to create a strong cadre or collective of individuals than (as we did) the operations and maintenance of the groups themselves. One suggestion might be to design an educational leadership program that takes into account a kind of after-program that supports and nurtures relationships between participants and the subsequently formed networks after the duration of the formal educational component is completed.

6. Recommendations

The following is a summary of observations on the value of networking and suggestions on how future initiatives might learn from our experiences. Sources of observations include Council, Council staff, facilitators, participants, and other stakeholders of the AABN.

6.a Is the Industry Ready?

By their very nature, primary producers in Alberta are (generally) a group of people who do their work in relative isolation. Yes, modern agriculture relies on successful planning, communication, and business strategy. True, modern agriculture is not a picture of traditionally long hours of seclusion and lonely work. But compared with (for example) a processing facility, a financial institution, or a government office driven by meetings, employees, and clients, the work of a twenty-first century producer is comparatively isolated.

That said, modern agriculture is no longer a business that can be successful if it is fully isolated, producers emerging from their fields to sell the crop once or twice a year. The agriculture and food production industry is one of markets and marketing, cost analysis, human resource management, short and long-term strategy, and so much more. These are skills that are individually difficult to master and rare is the person who can succeed at all of them alone.

Then, is there a place for individuals to learn from each other? Is the industry ready for collaboration and cooperative business skill development? Is modern agriculture the place for peers with similar struggles and successes to find the time from their schedules to remove a few more layers of that isolation (even if it is only perceived) and construct relationships and networks that help them learn, adapt, problem-solve, and strengthen their businesses? We think networks have a place and that the industry is ready – and that this will only become more true as time passes.

6.b Future Attempts

Groups considering implementation of a peer networking program of this sort in the future may wish to consider some or all of the recommendations derived from the operations of Alberta Agri-Business Network. These include:

6.b.i Recruitment and Sourcing Participants

Focus on the event or program, and support any ‘natural’ networks rather than focusing on network recruitment.

More than one participant noted that there was something “artificial” or “forced” in the way that network groups were organized. Ultimately the strength of the network lies in the strength of the relationships between participants. We may

have found ourselves pushing the “destination” rather than the “journey” of a peer network, so to speak. Of course, it could be argued that our kick-off event and our forum were in and of themselves a small version of this, but perhaps a one or two day event is insufficient to foster the development of these kinds of relationships, and ultimately what spawns network-type interaction is longer events or more involved learning programs.

Excluding the consideration above, implementation of a peer networking program might consider:

6.b.ii Breadth of the Target Audience

Choose a narrow range of participants, rather than province-wide recruitment.

The willingness of producers to travel for a valuable experience cannot be underrated. Some of our participants traveled hours to reach peer network meetings. But focusing on recruitment (keeping in mind the previous point) may suit a long term strategy for group sustainability if there is a geography consideration more tightly incorporated into the plan early on in network operations.

6.b.iii Rules of Order and Meeting Parameters

Encourage groups to start by setting their own strong rules for meetings and participation based on suggestions.

We undervalued our success early on, and we were told by some participants that if we were to make the rules too “strict” there may be reluctance to continue. This was not a unanimous position. Successful groups, we’ve learned, find stronger cohesion in firm rules that encourage participation and discourage participants who do not take the effort seriously.

6.b.iv Membership Fees and Participation Incentive

Tie a cash cost to participation to help ensure attendance, and support rigid rules on attendance and participation.

Perhaps undervaluing our own success, we did not incorporate a cash contribution into the AABN model for participation and instead absorbed the entire cost of the effort, suggesting instead that a payment model would be better suited as the groups moved towards independence. However, not only did this create a situation where members might suddenly be required to pay for something previously had for free, it may have missed an important opportunity to build in a participation incentive for members.

6.b.v Formal Inter-group Collaboration

More frequent cross-group meetings may benefit networks overall.

Again, it could be argued that we were working towards this as the project unexpectedly ended funding. Our March 2008 event was scheduled to be a formal meeting of the four operational groups to enhance their own experiences with the AABN. This was something that was suggested late in the operational process and, once committed to, was highly anticipated by participants. It may or not be a key to success, but it could be important in any similar group-building effort.

6.b.vi Rotating or Specialty Facilitators

Facilitator-to-group relationship might work better as a facilitator-to-topic relationship, where multiple facilitators / experts are contracted and any given facilitator / expert might only attend one or two topic-specific meetings a year on a rotating basis.

Finally, the idea of a rotational schedule for facilitators was a model that, in retrospect, offered a number of advantages. First, a rotating facilitator removes the notion of a single “leader” for the group and encourages members to take charge. Second, rotating “experts” create topic-driven meetings and might encourage higher participation rates. Third, the transition to a facilitator-free group model becomes simpler as the facilitator gradually becomes just a guest speaker, and eventually an optional component. Finally, the perceived value of “bringing in an expert” is higher and may make it easier for groups to establish a pay-to-belong model of membership.

7. Acknowledgements

The Agriculture & Food Council's Human Resource Action Team would like to acknowledge the funding, effort, and support of the many groups and participants involved in the implementation of the Alberta Agri-Business Network.



Many thanks go out to the efforts of our facilitators, speakers, advisors, and participants who gave their time, expertise, and energy to make the Network as successful as it was.

The author of this report would like to acknowledge the efforts of everyone involved in collecting, compiling, and refining the information presented here and also his heartfelt appreciation at the experience and opportunity provided in his involvement in the management this effort.

For more information, or to request supporting documents additional to this report, please contact Brad Salomons at the Agriculture & Food Council:

Email: brad.salomons@agfoodcouncil.com
Phone: 780-955-3714 extension 236

Alberta Agri-Business Network was created under Agriculture and Food Council's Peer Network Project and is a partnership of the Innovation in Agribusiness Management Fund, Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Renewal Chapter of the Agricultural Policy Framework: A Federal Provincial Territorial Initiative.